Lust for the Sky

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The opening sequence of ***Bliss*** *(Hemdah)* (2025), a video work by Ayelet Carmi and Meirav Heiman, depicts a group of women running—perhaps fleeing. Clutched in their hands are various plants; from their bodies hang baskets, bags, test tubes, and jars. They take refuge in an abandoned structure, where they organize into a tiered human formation. Within this vertical constellation, they nourish and care for one another, drawing upon the botanical and nutritional resources they carry. The group spans generations—young and old, one pregnant, another nursing. Each woman enacts a role: one waters, another oversees germination, and one weaves straw baskets, passed along the ascending chain of women to meet their needs.

In her 1986 essay *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin advocates for a story centered not on the hunter, but on the gatherer.[1] The hunting story is undeniably seductive—structured around a hero, a weapon, and a kill. The gathering story, by contrast, follows a collective—mostly women—working together. It resists dramatic climax, especially of the violent kind, and its technologies are not instruments of death but of sustenance: sacks, bags, and other vessels used to gather food and carry it home—together, and more efficiently than slaying a mammoth. For Le Guin, described as "an anthropologist of other worlds",[2] the gatherers' story becomes emblematic of a form of literature that eschews heroism, resists conflict-driven structure, and follows a non-linear progression.

Carmi and Heiman, too, may be understood as anthropologists of other worlds. Their works depict realities suspended between past, future, and a parallel present—uncertain whether they ever existed, will come to be, or are unfolding elsewhere. In ***Bliss***, the cave paintings that inscribe the myth of the hunt are replaced by contemporary graffiti, covering the walls of the industrial structure that shelters the fleeing women in a moment that feels both primordial and apocalyptic. This quasi-gatherer collective, ascending from ground to ceiling, is composed solely of women—as if the male hunters have been left behind, the world stripped of their presence. Their formation is not fleeting but enduring: we see them through day and night, awake and asleep, as the seasons change and the weather shifts. "There did I know a delight (*hemdah*) beyond all delight," wrote Dahlia Ravikovitch in the poem that lends the work its name, evoking a utopian landscape, lush and overflowing.[3]

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[1] Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, Cosmogenesis, 2019. Le Guin's argument draws on anthropological research suggesting that in prehistoric societies, the primary source of food was not hunted meat but gathered plants. See, for example, Sally Slocum, "Woman the Gatherer: Male Bias in Anthropology," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, edited by Rayna R. Reiter, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975, pp. 36–50.

[2] Marleen S. Barr, "Ursula K. Le Guin: an anthropologist of other worlds," *Nature*, February 23, 2018, https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-02439-7

[3] Dahlia Ravikovitch, "Delight" (*Hemdah*), in *There Did I Know* delight*: Selected Poems*, Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2017 [Hebrew]; English translation by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld, "Poems by Dahlia Ravikovitch," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, no.

Folded into the title “Bliss” (*Hemdah*) is the idyllic nature of the alternative feminine existence envisioned in Carmi and Heiman’s video—a life rooted in plant-based nourishment and mutual care, free of heroism and conflict. Yet, the technologies that make this existence possible deserve attention: the gathering tools Le Guin describes—bags and containers that allow the women to carry food and healing to their destination and pass them along the vertical column they have built. Though equally essential is the column itself: a five-tiered structure of women, the lowest anchored to the ground, the highest supporting a ceiling on the verge of collapse.

The artists conceived this column drawing on the Greek caryatids—architectural support columns carved in the form of women. What, then, is the relationship between the *hemdah*—the “bliss/delight”—inherent to cooperative feminine existence and its phallic form of a caryatid?

In her book *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude* (2014), feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero interrogates the entrenched Western canon that depicts the human as an upright figure, and the masculine ideal as vertical. In contrast, she proposes the inclined human—epitomized in the maternal figure who bends toward her child. Cavarero questions the association of inclination with femininity and instead advocates for an ethics of leaning—of attentiveness, of offering and receiving support—over the rigid, individualistic ascent toward verticality. “Maternal inclination,” she writes, “could work as a module for a different, more disruptive, and revolutionary geometry, whose aim is to rethink the very core of community.”[4]

Viewing ***Bliss*** raises the question of whether the feminine existence it enacts aligns with the legacy of uprightness and the patriarchal order that produced the caryatids—or whether, despite their rise, the women of the column offer a counter-geometry, of form and ethics, whose very movement carries a disruptive force.

These questions invite a broader reflection on two interwoven themes that recur dialectically in Carmi and Heiman’s oeuvre: movement and the body. An examination of three of their video works—***Bliss*** and ***Zahara***, currently on view at Ticho House, and ***The Israel Trail: Procession***, shown last year at the Israel Museum—reveals a subtle dynamic in their collaboration, one that both connects and contrasts horizontal and vertical motion, as well as the constrained body and the transcending body of their heroines.

In the work ***Zahara*** (2021), the artists return to the story of Zahara Levitov, a Palmach fighter who, in 1948, joined the new Israeli army as a pilot and, later that same year, died in a plane crash into the wall of the Monastery of the Cross in Jerusalem. The video opens with an aerial shot that gradually closes in on the heroine, lying in the Valley of the Cross at the foot of the monastery. She rotates slowly in a spiral, evoking the failure of flight—her body tethered to a large, broken wing trailing along the ground. After she collapses, another woman enters the frame, attempting to mend the wing—a figure recalling Ruth Dayan, who

16 (Fall 2008), p. 225. The curator preferred the term "bliss", which is used throughout the article and exhibition.

[4] Adriana Cavarero, *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*, trans. Amanda Minervini and Adam Sitze, Stanford University Press, 2016, p. 131.

had evacuated the injured Levitov to Shaare Zedek Hospital. Now, following this vertical fall, the two embark on a reverse motion: a horizontal journey on foot through the streets of Jerusalem, toward the hospital. The fall becomes a prelude to walking, producing a spatial movement that stands in contrast to the trajectory of ***Bliss***: in ***Zahara***, the collapse of flight gives way to grounded progress; in ***Bliss***, the path of escape spirals upward into ascent.

Situated between the two works is Carmi and Heiman's groundbreaking piece, ***The Israel Trail: Procession*** (2018), which traces a passage across the landscapes of Israel—a traversal that echoes Zaharah's journey, though framed by the Israeli natural environment in place of the urban backdrop. However, a constraint imposed by the artists—the prohibition against foot-to-ground contact—demands that movement along the path be carried out in elevation, above the earth. This horizontal motion, enacted through a range of vertical maneuvers using devices that enable mobility without touching the ground, seems to foreshadow the ultimate verticality realized in ***Bliss***.

The three works can thus be situated along a shared continuum of movement: beginning with descent, continuing through horizontality, and culminating in ascent. In ***Zahara***, a vertical crash gives way to horizontal progression; in ***The Israel Trail***, that journey persists, now elevated above the ground; and in ***Bliss***, horizontal motion serves as a springboard for vertical propulsion. Yet in all three, a striving toward verticality is present: even ***Zahara*** ends with the heroine ascending the historic Shaare Zedek Hospital building, stair by stair, until she reaches the roof. There, she circles once more—this time as the aerial shot slowly pulls away, turning skyward.

Moreover, in all three works, the upward movement represents a physical achievement by the participants, attained through their confrontation with constraints imposed by the artists. The heroine of ***Zahara*** must carry a large, dysfunctional wing—what the artists call a "useless prosthetic limb." In ***The Israel Trail*** and ***Bliss***, the participants are denied the basic ability to place their feet on the ground. While in ***Zahara*** the impairment leads to grounding, in ***The Israel Trail*** and ***Bliss***, the very limitation becomes a means of elevation. In both, vertical motion is accompanied by a narrowing of bodily freedom: in ***Bliss***, this restriction intensifies, as the women's transformation into a caryatid-like structure effectively roots them in place.

The women of ***Bliss*** are fixed to the vertical axis they themselves compose—like the women of Karyai who became columns, and like Daphne who became a tree, another symbol from Greek mythology echoed in ***Bliss***. Several of the caryatid women appear in various stages of arboreal transformation; in one, we witness a companion tending to her hand, which has turned into a branch.[5] Yet the women of the column—like the participants in the trail parade and Zahara with her broken wing—evoke, more broadly, the fragmented remains of Greek sculptures and their Roman copies, known for their severed limbs. Such are the most famous caryatids from the Acropolis in Athens, whose arms exhibit varying degrees of amputation, and numerous statues of male heroes left without arms or legs. Considering

[5] Notably, the woman who aids her companion—offering care to the arm that has become non-functional—is portrayed by the same actress who, in ***Zahara***, attends to the heroine's incapacitated wing, embodying the figure of Ruth Dayan.

Carmi and Heiman's heroines in relation to these sculptural remnants and their place in art history may shed light on the nature of movement within their works.

The 18th-century art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann, followed by contemporary philosopher Jacques Rancière, observed that the beauty and impact of ancient Greek statues with severed limbs lie in the tension between physical disablement and the heroic vitality they embody—where mutilation stands in stark contrast to rippling muscle. "Just as only the trunk remains of a mighty oak that has been felled and stripped of its twigs and branches, so the image of the hero sits there, maltreated and mutilated: head, breast, arms, and legs are all missing," wrote Winckelmann of the **Belvedere Torso** in the Vatican, which he identified as a likeness of Hercules. "At first glance you will probably see only a shapeless stone. But if you are able to penetrate the secrets of art, then you will perceive a miracle."[6] Rancière summarized the enchantment cast by this sculptural remnant by noting that "activity and passivity merge together, forming an equivalence," suggesting that this very fusion gives rise to "the paradoxical efficacy of art."[7]

A similar fusion unfolds in the work of Carmi and Heiman. Here, the paradoxical force does not emerge from any external ruin inflicted upon the piece, but from the charged tension it holds—between the constrained bodies of their heroines and the acts of heroism they perform.[8] The binds that hold them become the very ground from which resilience is forged.[9] Yet it is not only the heroines' formidable physical exertions that leave their mark, but also the artists' deep investment in envisioning and crafting the very strategies by which to navigate the constraints they themselves devised. It is an artistic gesture of narrowing and release, of confinement and motion—a movement played out in the shift from the horizontal to the vertical—where their paradoxical efficacy emerges.

In the three works discussed here, vertical motion—or its climactic peak—signals a technological achievement: aviation, transportation, and construction. In ***Zahara***, this achievement is symbolic—we encounter the protagonist post-crash, her flight reduced to a vestige in the form of a broken wing. By contrast, in ***The Israel Trail*** and ***Bliss***, technological feats actively generate the depicted movements. In these works, technological ingenuity becomes synonymous with artistic accomplishment—embodied in the design and realization of mechanisms that enable motion above earth and support the formation of a human column. Correspondingly, one may distinguish between artistic skill, or *techne*, in its traditional sense—as seen in Zahara's wing, meticulously painted and cut over hours, an

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[6] Johann Joachim Winckelmann, "Description of the Torso in the Belvedere in Rome," in *Johann Joachim Winckelmann on Art, Architecture, and Archaeology*, trans. David Carter (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2013), p. 144.

[7] Jacques Rancière, "The Paradoxes of Political Art," in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 138.

[8] It is worth noting that Winckelmann and Rancière highlight not only the tension between the statue's mutilation and the hero it depicts, but also the contrast between the figure's physical power and its portrayal in a state of stillness. This differs from the heroines in Carmi and Heiman's work, whose constrained bodies are shown in moments of intense physical effort.

[9] The works discussed here are not the only ones in which Carmi and Heiman place their heroines within constructions that restrict their movement and demand Sisyphean effort to activate. This is also true of the works *Eserimion* (2016) and *Sphera* (2018), which feature devices later used in *The Israel Trail*.

object in its own right, displayed alongside the video—and the *techne* of ***The Israel Trail*** and ***Bliss***, a more contemporary mode of artistic competence in which an original idea evolves into a complex, multifaceted, and collaborative project.

The progression along the Israel Trail, without setting foot upon it, indeed offers an alternative to the pioneering ethos of conquering the land step by step. At the same time, it enacts another kind of conquest: a triumph over limitation through physical strength and inventive design. So too the "human caryatid"—a feminine, collective mode of existence that is simultaneously an acrobatic and architectural spectacle. The vertical movements in Carmi and Heiman's work—culminating in the phallic apex of ***Bliss***—embody forms of feminine power that challenge the masculine symbolic order, and perhaps participate in it. Additionally, this elevation, while offering an escape from the cultural codes inscribed on the ground, produces a kind of detachment from mundane life. In ***Zahara***, the heroine's failed flight draws her back into the streets of 'earthly' Jerusalem, into contact with the human and material world below. But in ***Bliss***, the women's elevation suspends them above the messiness of lived experience.[10] Their rise registers as triumph and as seclusion—inscribing, within a narrative of collective feminine existence, echoes of the solitary heroic tale.

Yet in ***Bliss***, as in Carmi and Heiman's earlier works, what unfolds before us is another kind of hero's tale—a tale of heroines. It tells the story of a caryatid that is not one woman but many, and who are not petrified but alive. It is the story of a monument that stands not at the threshold of a public building, but within the shell of an abandoned one; a pole dance that has long since been reclaimed from the men's club and now plays for the dancers alone. It is the story of Daphnes whose fates remain unwritten, of heroines whose achievements and limitations are entangled, inseparable, unresolved. Their ascent, too, warrants a closer gaze.

The women of ***Bliss*** do indeed form an imposing column, but this is not a classical caryatid form that erects a solitary woman for architectural purposes at superhuman scale. The vertical formation here does not arise from the kind of individualistic ascent that Cavarero critiques; rather, it is composed of women physically and ideologically leaning on one another. The women of the column, whose existence depends on mutual support, appear before the viewer in a wide range of postures: they sit, recline, lie down—horizontal,

[10] This evokes a parallel between Carmi and Heiman's caryatid and life in a high-rise tower. In a recent article, a New York real estate sales director remarked: "Clients tell me they prefer to leave the building as little as possible [...] These are people who would rather their children not roam the city streets, among the crowds of tourists and the homeless. The result is what I call a 'vertical city,' living and dwelling in closed compounds." (Tzach Yoked, "New York's Skyscrapers Are Becoming Vertical, Closed Cities. You Won't Believe What's Inside," *Haaretz*, March 27, 2025 [translation from Hebrew: Alicia Kamien Kazhdan]). In this context, *Bliss* can be compared to Larissa Sansour's video work *Nation Estate* (2012), which imagines an alternative existence for the Palestinian nation within a residential skyscraper. There, vertical organization is presented as a solution to concrete collective and individual hardships—and as a platform for femininity, continuity, and rootedness—symbolized by the pregnant protagonist who navigates the tower and waters an olive tree growing within it. Yet throughout, the work satirizes the fusion of organic Palestinian life with the cold, alienating aesthetics of the luxury tower marked by stylized design and jarring spatial disjunctions.

diagonal, and inverted. In doing so, they demonstrate how the inclined can also rise—not alone, and not by straightening, but through collective effort, through leaning.

Like Zahara, who climbs to the rooftop to perform a final circle marking the end of her life; like the looping video that ensures the women of the column will always return to the moment of flight; like the branches of a tree that reach skyward—"As tree boughs lusted for the sky with all their might," as Dahlia Ravikovitch writes[11]—this is an ascent propelled by the force of nature, a yearning for height that emerges before the withering begins.

[11] Ravikovitch, "Delight" (*Hemdah*).